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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNSCOL DISCUSSES HIZBALLAH, TIGHT

ELECTION AND LAF WITH CENTCOM ASSESSMENT TEAM

REF: A. BEIRUT 01722

1B. BEIRUT 01677

1C. BEIRUT 01663

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a December 9 meeting with visiting CENTCOM Assessment Team members and the Ambassador, UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Chief of Staff Jack Christofides, PolChief Diego Zorrilla, and Poloff Rami Shehadeh provided a broad assessment of Lebanese politics after the Doha Accord. Zorrilla described electoral alliances as "fixed" but noted the importance of the 50 percent of Christians who were still undecided in determining the outcome of the 2009 elections. Zorrilla called Hizballah "confident" because of overt Western overtures to Syria, the absence of a U.S. attack against Iran, and the strength of the group's regional alliances. It is not certain that victory in upcoming elections is the group's goal, he said.

12. (C) On Ghajar, Shehadeh described Israeli hesitations on a proposed deal. He noted the opposing views of the Lebanese Armed Forces; he said some Lebanese see the force as purely Christian and important in protecting the Christian minority while others judge the group is confessionally balanced and thus incapable of intervening in domestic issues. End Summary.

ELECTION OUTCOME UNCERTAIN

13. (C) Meeting December 9 with the Ambassador and visiting CENTCOM Assessment Team (CAT), UNSCOL staff assessed that Lebanon, six months after the Doha Accords, had implemented all requirements of Doha -- including election of a president, establishment of a national unity government, and formation of a new electoral law -- but the country's core problems remained unchanged. They described reconciliation efforts as superficial and limited to Lebanon's upper political echelons. Zorrilla attributed the generally stable stagnation to a "wait and see" mentality of regional actors.

14. (C) Despite the fact that the new electoral law does not include needed reforms such as uniform ballots, Zorrilla opined the law would provide a good basis for 2009

parliamentary elections. He noted that the law was adopted by consensus and far in advance of elections; arguing that this basis of legitimacy would make election results less contentious.

¶5. (C) Overall results in the 2009 parliamentary elections are uncertain, the UNSCOL team agreed. Zorrilla assessed that electoral alliances within March 14 and the opposition seem to be holding strong and the separation between the opposing blocs is as wide as ever. He expected neither side would win a sweeping majority and the elections would be decided by the swing Christian vote.

¶6. (C) Lebanese politics are currently defined by the actions of Christian leader Michel Aoun, Zorrilla said. He asserted that 25 percent of the Christian population support Aoun, 25 percent support Kataeb head Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and the remaining 50 percent are undecided. Aoun's recent actions -- including trips to Iran and Syria -- would fail to attract the undecided voters. This could indicate that either Aoun views his alliance with Hizballah as more important than an electoral victory or that he is relying on the Shia vote to win the elections.

HIZBALLAH'S THOUGHT PROCESS

¶7. (C) Hizballah, whose members meet with Zorrilla and UNSCOL Coordinator Michael Williams regularly, exudes confidence, Zorrilla said. He thought that their confidence stems from overt Western overtures to Syria, the absence of a U.S.

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attack against Iran, and the strength of the group's regional alliances. Zorrilla differentiated between what he called Hizballah's tactical alliance with Syria -- which he assessed as expendable -- and its more fundamental alliance with Iran.

Zorrilla acknowledged Iranian goals in the region could eventually threaten Hizballah's domestic support. He also cited Israeli-Syrian negotiations as a possible concern for the group.

¶8. (C) Domestically, Hizballah argues the May violence it triggered helped "unblock" the political situation and ensure the election of a president and the establishment of a national unity government. Zorrilla assessed the alliance between Hizballah and Aoun was strong; he noted decreasing references to the Memorandum of Understanding between the parties and a new rhetoric emphasizing the fundamental alliance of minorities to oppose Sunni domination. He described former Prime Minister Omar Karame and Druze Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan as strong Hizballah allies as well.

¶9. (C) The "liberation" of Shebaa Farms has also diminished as a justification for Hizballah's bearing arms, Zorrilla said. SYG Hassan Nasrallah has instead focused on the defense of Lebanon in general as a reason to maintain the resistance. Zorrilla said he had information on Hizballah rearmament but said hints from his contacts suggest improvements in the quantity and quality of Hizballah's arms, specifically ground-to-air missiles, following the summer 2006 war with Israel.

¶10. (C) UNSCOL staff said it is not certain that victory in upcoming elections was Hizballah's goal. On the one hand, Hizballah's winning the elections would show it enjoyed majority support by the population. However, Hizballah has said that if it were part of a majority, it would form a national unity government with its political opponents, suggesting the group does not want the challenges inherent in ruling authority, Zorrilla said. He said the opposition bloc received \$1.2 billion from Iran for elections, \$800 million of which was earmarked for Hizballah and Amal. Zorrilla said Saudi Arabia sent \$1.5 billion to March 14.

¶11. (C) Hizballah seeks to give voice to the Shia and it requires state cover to accomplish its goals. Hizballah has a measure of respect for the institutions of the state, demonstrated by its serious stance on elections, but does not use participation in the state to protect its existence, Zorrilla argued.

¶12. (C) Zorrilla said Michael Williams and he meet with Head of Security Wafiq Safa on security issues, Head of External Relations Nawaf Musawi, President of Consultation Center for Studies and Documentation Ali Fayad, and Minister of Labor Mohammed Fneish. Former Special Coordinator Geir Pedersen met with MP Mohammed Raad, but Williams has not yet seen Raad. Zorrilla said Williams does not meet Hizballah contacts as frequently as Pedersen (at least every two weeks), but events during Pedersen's tenure were more tumultuous than now.

NO GHAJAR SOLUTION SOON

¶13. (C) UNSCOL Poloff Rami Shehadeh, who covers Lebanon's regional relationships through the lens of UNSCR 1701 and border delineation, said February 2009 Israeli elections made movement on the Lebanon-Israel, Syria-Israel, and Israel-Palestinian Territories tracks unlikely before August ¶2009. He cited the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which is expected to start operating in March 2009, as an event that could affect the domestic situation. However, Shehadeh noted the court was unlikely to issue indictments quickly, so any effect would be delayed.

¶14. (C) On Ghajar, Shehadeh said Lebanon had verbally agreed to extend for a few weeks its November 22 deadline for Israeli acceptance of the UN proposal and stressed the need for patience on the Lebanese side. Shehadeh assessed that

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all Israeli policy and security concerns regarding Ghajar could be addressed in an agreement and said the main sticking point on the Israeli side was the legal rights of Israeli citizens in northern Ghajar. He said Israel fears legal action against the government if a hasty agreement fails to protect the rights of those citizens.

¶15. (C) Additionally, Shehadeh described Israeli uncertainty that any agreement on Ghajar with the current Lebanese Government would be respected by the next Lebanese Government. Describing Ghajar from an internal Israeli political viewpoint, Shehadeh said current Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak probably did not want to open the Ghajar file as it could show his previous mistakes as prime minister. Alternatively, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who has championed Ghajar and UNSCR 1701, would support progress on Ghajar before Israeli elections. Shehadeh said he will travel with Michael Williams to Israel next month, but UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofides said the UN's agenda for the meetings is to be in listening mode. He predicted the UN will "be in the business" of Ghajar a while longer.

¶16. (C) Shebaa Farms is trickier, according to Shehadeh, as both withdrawal of forces and establishment of sovereignty are required. He reaffirmed the UN stance that the land is Syrian but said more work by the UN cartographer is necessary. However, Syria and Israel still refuse to engage with the cartographer on the issue of sovereignty. Shehadeh hopes the UN can build on the future work of the joint Lebanon-Syria committee established to delineate shared borders.

DRAB VIEW OF LAF POTENTIAL

¶17. (C) There are two views of the LAF, the UNSCOL staff said. Some Lebanese view the LAF as a Christian force and see the need to protect it. Others see the LAF as a true

reflection of the country's confessional breakdown and, as such, incapable of intervening domestically without political consensus. Shehadeh noted the only decision involving the LAF likely to gain political consensus would be action against Palestinian extremists in the existing camps. He called "frightening" the idea of a battle between the LAF and Palestinian militias.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) UNSCOL's description of Hizballah as "confident" tracks with what we are hearing from several of our contacts.

While we assess that Hizballah will work hard to achieve a majority for itself and its allies in the 2009 election, it is plausible that if it succeeds, it might seek less of a direct role in the government than that to which it would be entitled. Hizballah followed that logic during the July 2008 cabinet formation, taking only one cabinet seat (Labor) for a Hizballah member and giving two others to allies. End Comment.

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